

Reorganizing DCPS Schools to Support Comprehensive Educational Programs and Services

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In cooperation with DCPS Chancellor Michelle Rhee, Deputy Mayor for Education Victor Reinoso and State Superintendent of Education Deborah Gist, a study team from the Brookings Institution, the Urban Institute, and 21st Century School Fund provided analysis of DCPS school enrollment patterns and neighborhood change as a foundation for the city's decisions about how to organize DCPS school boundaries, feeder patterns, space allocations, grade configurations, and school sizes. This document describes that analysis and proposes a framework for public dialogue and decision-making on the implementation of school reorganization.

Need for Reorganization

The District's total population has increased slightly since 2000 but there was no corresponding growth in the number of school-age children. Overall public school enrollment has been consistently declining – from a high of 146,000 students in 1967 – while DCPS enrollment decline has accelerated in the past 10 years. These declines, coupled with a dramatically expanded supply of schools – 70 new charter campuses have opened since 1998 while DCPS has closed less than 10 schools – have left DCPS with significant excess public school facility space in every ward except Ward 3. (*See supporting documentation.*) The inefficiencies of managing the administration, staffing and facilities in underutilized schools limits DCPS's ability to offer a full complement of quality curriculum programs, services, and opportunities for all of its students. These issues were identified in the DCPS Master Education Plan (February 2006) in Chapter VI: Organize Schools to Better Serve the Needs of Students, and in Chapter VIII: Make Sure that Every Child has Access to an Appropriate Range of Educational Resources. The Master Education Plan's conclusions in 2006 were reached after an extensive education planning process. This document is the next step toward the implementation of the vision and recommendations of that plan.

The DCPS 2006 Educational Facility Master Plan identified a number of schools to be closed. However, the Facility Master Plan did not address decisions about space and school allocations, grade configurations, feeder patterns or student assignment. The study team has now developed a process and criteria for identifying which schools are priorities for reorganization and why, and will follow up this analysis with additional work to inform the critical system organization decisions.

Vision

The DCPS Master Education Plan proposed a vision for the organization of its public schools. It made the case for changes in student assignment policy, grade configurations, feeder patterns, and school size, stating that:

“We need to do a better job of organizing our schools so that the grade configurations and feeder patterns ease the transitions of students and their families from one grade level to another — providing families clusters of schools with which to work and which, in turn, are working with each other. Our system also can ensure that school policy enables families to choose where their children will attend school with the least effort and uncertainty for the family.”

In addition, the Master Education Plan proposed changing school boundaries, closing schools, and increasing school enrollments. The MEP predicts that the implementation of those changes would create a school system where:

“space and staff are allocated efficiently in support of high-quality educational programs and services,...a school system that is better balanced, in which students in larger schools are not penalized with less funding just to maintain schools that are too small to independently provide an adequate education.”

The school reorganization steps recommended by the study team in this document are based upon the policies and strategies of the Master Education Plan. These recommendations are premised on a vision of neighborhood elementary schools that will anchor their communities and provide high-quality educational programs and services to all elementary-age students within safe, walking distances of their homes. This vision is coupled with DCPS’ commitment to early childhood education and its ongoing efforts at the secondary level to offer more rigorous academics and age-appropriate student services and supports to middle school age students. The improvements to middle grades education are being bolstered by the Children’s Youth Investment Trust initiative to provide all middle-school children in the District with access to high-quality activities outside of the school day. At the high school level, using both magnet and comprehensive high schools, DCPS is aiming to create a robust curriculum with adequate student supports and services to ensure that all students graduate work- and college-ready.

Identifying Priority Schools for Reorganization

The study team analyzed neighborhood and school enrollment changes in order to help inform school reorganization issues and choices. The team prepared and worked with school-level, student-level, and neighborhood-level data sets.

Application of Enrollment Decline and Under Enrollment Factors

All DCPS elementary schools were analyzed to determine those schools with enrollment decline between 2002-2006 greater than the 5-year DCPS elementary median change (21%) **and** with enrollment size less than the DCPS elementary median (272 students in grades PS-5). Since accelerated enrollment decline and the need for sufficient enrollment at each site are driving the need to close, co-locate or consolidate schools, the team examined which schools were most heavily impacted by BOTH of these factors. These factors became the first level criteria for identifying schools that may need reorganization.

Application of these joint criteria generated 33 elementary schools as candidates for closing, co-location or consolidation. Two schools with significant capital investment substantially

underway – HD Cooke and Wheatley – and one school that is already consolidated –Adams – were eliminated from the list.

The same criteria – greater than median enrollment loss and less than median size – were applied to middle schools. The median 5-year change for middle and junior high schools was a 29% decline. The median 2006-2007 enrollment size for middle and junior high schools (BEFORE moving 9th graders to HS) was 334 students. Applying these joint criteria generated a list of seven middle and junior high schools.

At the high school level, enrollment change and school size was examined by magnet high schools separate from comprehensive high schools. The median 5-year enrollment change at the magnet high school level was a 7% increase and at the comprehensive high school level the median enrollment change was a 14% decline. The median sizes were 418 and 825 respectively.

School by School Analysis

Application of the first level criteria identified schools that required further analysis. The study team then prepared additional analysis on isolated schools, neighborhoods with anticipated student growth, and attendance patterns at all 33 elementary schools under consideration for reorganization. In conjunction with staff from DCPS, the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education, the Office of the State Superintendent of Education, and the Office of Planning, the study team met for two half-day working sessions to test a process for further examining the schools that met the first level criteria. These working sessions utilized an interactive, collaborative approach that combined local knowledge with data, maps and city planning information to better understand student enrollment patterns and projections. While the sessions focused on the elementary schools, some secondary schools were examined using the same approach.

The following school planning issues were examined:

- Identification of schools that are isolated – located more than ½ mile from any other DCPS elementary school, or where closure would require students to cross a major geographical barrier to reach the nearest alternate DCPS school.
 - *Example e:* Students in the Kenilworth ES boundary area would have to cross Interstate-295 to reach other elementary schools and students in the Benning ES boundary area would have to cross Benning Road and East Capitol Streets to attend other elementary schools.
- Areas of projected student growth were also identified across the city in an attempt to avoid closing schools in neighborhoods where the school-age population is anticipated to bounce back in the next 10 years.
 - *Example:* Draper ES is located in a census tract with large numbers of births and large numbers of public school students anticipated from planned new housing units.

- Current patterns of attendance and residential location of public school students around each school were considered in an effort to determine how students might redistribute in the event of closure, and whether or not those “receiving” schools will have sufficient capacity.
 - *Example:* Truesdell ES could serve as a receiving school for students from Rudolph based on current enrollment patterns of students in the Rudolph neighborhood and the lack of any major street barrier between the two schools.
- Characteristics of the target schools themselves – building size, the presence of a gymnasium, auditorium, and/or outside play space – and whether the school and its amenities functioned as a resource for the community, (e.g., the presence of athletic fields or a recreation center).
 - *Example:* Scott Montgomery ES has a small fixed-seat auditorium and is located two short blocks from the Kennedy Recreation Center.

The current condition and utilization of school buildings was not considered as a factor in whether to reorganize a school because DCPS capital funds can and should be allocated in support of rightsizing and modernizing the school facilities remaining after this round of adjustments.

Citywide Policy Implications

This discussion of school factors was framed within a larger discussion of an overarching vision for the city. A number of neighborhood and housing policy issues that will affect schools were identified. Coordination between schools and neighborhood planning is critical to meet the city’s goal of attracting and retaining families with children. Issues considered included:

- Affordability of housing, especially for families
- Relationship between new housing unit types (i.e., condo, multi-family rental, single family) and attracting families with children
- Timing of school and neighborhood change
 - If a school is closed because of enrollment decline and new affordable housing units are subsequently created nearby, where will the children in those units attend school?
- Safety and walkability of neighborhoods for children
- Accessibility of school sites to major public transportation
- Continued growth in the public charter schools
- Allowance for growth within DCPS as vigorous programs and modernized facilities become attractive to families

Community Engagement and Implementation Planning

Once the city has developed a preliminary list of schools for reorganization, there must be a process whereby local community members can constructively engage and advise the District on

its plans and decisions. We believe strongly that such an outreach effort will improve the quality of the city's plan. At this time, city and school leaders should be prepared to clearly outline:

1. What is proposed for each school: boundary change, program move, consolidation
2. Why this is the reorganization proposed: enrollment size & decline, inefficient use of school building, other schools in proximity
3. What is proposed for the receiving schools: program and service improvements, local school restructuring; capital improvements, reconfigurations of grade levels or feeder patterns
4. What are the budget implications of the reorganization: fixed costs and funds that would transfer with students
5. When would the reorganization take place
6. Where would children in the affected schools be assigned, what would be the school choice options available to families, and how would that process be managed

Once decisions have been made regarding which schools will be closed as part of this reorganization, a second set of decisions will need to be made regarding the reuse of the buildings.

Supporting Documentation

- 1) Background on need for reorganization: DCPS & charter school enrollment trends, DCPS facilities utilization
- 2) Tables by level: ES, MS (including K-8s), SHS
Table of school enrollment & building capacity table, by level